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State Policy, Community Identity, and Management of Chinese Cemeteries in Colonial Malaya

Politique étatique, identité communautaire et gestion des cimetières chinois de la Malaisie britannique

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Introduction

This article looks at how the Chinese community in Malaya negotiated with the state on the control and management of Chinese cemeteries during the colonial period. Only with the establishment of colonial administration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did burial grounds and cemeteries in Malaya come to be regulated. Regulations were introduced when public lands were set aside for cemeteries, and public health and urban planning were the prime reasons for such state action. There were also social, religious, cultural and historical concerns that required the attention of the state, as well as the community. The article examines why these different issues became matters of concern at particular periods in time.

The article also discusses the extent to which cemeteries were a marker of identity of the community. Within cemeteries are gravestones which provide some details of the people buried such as their dates of birth and death as well as their ethnic background or place of origin.[2] Each gravestone is a record of the identity of an individual and collectively the cemetery is a marker of the community. Thus the remains of old Chinese cemeteries found in different parts of Southeast Asia serve as evidence that there had once been a Chinese population in those early settlements even though today none from the

1. Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

2. Julie Rugg, "Defining the place of burial: what makes a cemetery?" *Mortality*, vol. 5:3 (2000), pp. 259-275. Also, Catherine Guéguen, "Chinese cemeteries: symbols of heritage," *Tulay: Chinese Heritage Digest*, vol. XXIII: 11 (Nov. 02-15, 2010), pp. 8-11.

community are to be found there.[3] In other cases, an early Chinese cemetery stands as a reminder of the historical presence of the community such as the Bukit China cemetery in Malacca.[4]

Cemeteries were also a marker of dialect distinctives. In the colonial period the Chinese had three types of burial grounds. One was community cemeteries managed by the various dialect associations, second, those managed by clan associations, and finally privately-owned burial plots. The early Chinese cemeteries were opened only to members of the trustees or managements' dialect groups. And although dialect divisions began to blur in social, economic and political activities, the demarcation of cemeteries along dialect lines persisted.

Finally the article touches on how procedures of burials and cemeteries allowed the state to further involve itself administratively in Chinese affairs. The end of the 19th century when the state introduced regulations on burials and cemeteries was also a time when the colonial government proscribed secret societies and the phasing out of the revenue farm system. Secret societies and the revenue system had enabled the Chinese to dominate the tin-mining industry and other economic activities during this period.[5] Thus, the implementation of various colonial regulations demonstrated clearly to the Chinese that the state decided not only the affairs of the living but also of their dead.

The State

The matter of burial grounds had attracted for some time the attention of the colonial state. This was partly because with the arrival of large number of Chinese migrants, some measures were necessary to deal with deaths and burials. Initially, many of the Chinese saw their stay in Malaya as temporary, hoping to return to China when they had made enough money. For those who could not return, the practice for many, if they were to die overseas, was to have their bodies taken back to their home village.[6] Over time, as more Chinese settled in Malaya, they buried their dead in small dialect-organized cemeteries within the settlements. The dialect associations offered social and even economic support, and so it was natural that this care extended to burial. The wealthier Chinese buried their dead in private plots.

In a period when there was weak enforcement of regulations governing burials, there was concern at the haphazard way the Chinese community in

3. Claudine Salmon, "Ancient Chinese Cemeteries of Indonesia as Vanishing Landmarks of the Past (17th-20th centuries)," in this issue.

4. Carolyn L. Cartier, "Creating Historical Open Space in Melaka," *The Geographic Review*, Vol. 83:4 (October, 1993), pp. 359-373.

5. Yen Ching-hwang, "Historical background," in Lee Kam Hing and Tan Chee Beng (Eds.), *The Chinese in Malaysia,* Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 1-36.

6. Terry Abraham and Priscilla Wegars, "Urns, Bones and Burners: Overseas Chinese Cemeteries," *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, 21 (2009), pp. 58-69.

colonial Singapore and Malaya buried its dead. This was surprising considering that the overseas Chinese had for long kept their cemeteries well-maintained. The most well-known of these is in Bukit China, Malacca where a cemetery said to date back to the Ming period is located. Spread over 250,000 square metres, Bukit China contains 12,500 graves.[7] There are reportedly other cemeteries of early Chinese settlements in the Malay Peninsula, many undocumented and others destroyed as development took place.

There were also those Chinese in Malaya and Singapore who buried their dead in private plots of land. These were mostly wealthy Chinese. One such private mausoleum and probably the last and most well-known belongs to the Loke Yew 陸佑 family. Buried in this private mausoleum are Loke Yew and a few of his family members. Loke died in 1917 and the private mausoleum was part of a rubber plantation, the Hawthornden Estate, which he owned, by now located inside the Ministry of Defense Malaysia compound.[8]

The impression of haphazardness of Chinese burial places towards the end of the 19th century was due to the fact there were a large number of unregistered Chinese burial grounds in Singapore. The matter was raised in the Singapore Municipal Council in 1889. One of the council members, Major H.E McCallum, the colonial engineer, displayed a map showing the distribution of unregistered burial grounds on the island. The map showed in particular a large number of registered and unregistered burial grounds lying to the north of Mount Faber. The concern over unregistered private burial lots had to do with the question of sanitation. Major McCallum claimed that the Chinese "could see the amount of sickness springing up in their midst".[9] Many of the unregistered burial grounds were within the town itself. Furthermore, the council was told that most of the desirable building sites in Singapore such as those on top of hills were being occupied by Chinese burial grounds.

The colonial administration had earlier taken steps to address the issue of burial grounds. The most important had been the setting up of municipality authorities in the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore.[10] In other non-Straits Settlements territories that later came under British administration, Sanitary Boards took over the responsibilities similar to the municipal councils. This was part of a larger move to delegate power to a local authority to look after the diverse responsibilities of managing sanitation and health, fire prevention, and water supply. Burial grounds came under the

7. Carolyn L. Cartier, "Creating Historical Open Space in Melaka," pp. 359-373.

8. Lee Kam Hing, "Loke Yew," in Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Southeast Asian Personalities of Chinese Descent*: *A Biographical Dictionary*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012, pp. 697-700.

9. *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, "Municipal Commission," 19 July 1889, p. 11.

10. C. Mary Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements, 1826-67: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony,* Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1972.

municipalities or sanitation boards, and these in turn were responsible to the state governments.

The first local authority in Malaya was established in George Town in Penang in 1801. A Committee of Assessors was established and in 1857, the power of local government in George Town was exercised by five Municipal Commissioners, three of whom were elected by a limited franchise. These elections were abolished in 1913. The municipality came under the state government. In 1951, as part of the move towards independence for Malaya, the British colonial authorities reintroduced local elections for nine of the fifteen municipal commissioners for George Town. In Kuala Lumpur the Sanitary Board was established in 1890. It was entrusted with public health, sanitation, drainage, street lighting, and urban development. The board consisted of officials and representations from prominent local and European businessmen and professionals.

To empower the local authorities in controlling burials and burial grounds, two Ordinances were introduced. These were first, the Ordinance for the Registration of Births and Deaths and second, the Ordinance to regulate the use of Burial and Burning Grounds outside the limits of municipalities. Provisions for the registration of births and deaths were first introduced in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Malacca. This followed the transfer of the Straits Settlements from India to Colonial Office on 1 April 1867. A Births and Deaths Registration Ordinance was passed (XVIII of 1868) and the first registration of birth began on 7 May 1869 and that of death on 1 May 1869. The registers of death were kept by the municipality.[11] The Ordinance required the Deputy Registrar to be informed of every birth and death in his district and he was to forward the particulars to the Registrar.[12] When death occurs, the Deputy Registrar was required, where practicable, to personally inspect the body and make inquiries among the people present at death of the circumstances surrounding the occurrence. Police officers and *penghulus* (village headmen) were to collect all births and deaths in their districts and to forward the data to the Deputy Registrar or Registrar. The Ordinance required that where it was suspected that death was caused by infectious diseases such as plagues, cholera or small pox this was to be ascertained and reported. All details of birth and death were sent to the Registrar, and reports regularly compiled. The Registrar-general was to prepare a general report to establish if there had been an increase or decrease of the population and on the factors that led to the particular trend.

The Ordinance to regulate the use of burial and burning grounds outside the limits of municipalities was introduced in 1887. Ordinance XI of 1887

11. Walter Makepeace et al. (Eds.), *One hundred years of Singapor*e, London: J. Murray, 1921, p. 507.

12. Ordinance No 59: Registration of Births and Deaths, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

placed the power of approving burial grounds with the Governor.[13] Under the 1887 Ordinance, trustees of public and private burial places were required to obtain a license for use of the burial grounds within three months of the Ordinance coming into force.[14] The Ordinance gave the authorities extensive powers to regulate burial and cremation grounds. The Governor may make rules for the registration, inspection and regulation of burial and burning grounds, prescribe the depth of graves and places of interment, determine the fees to be levied in burial and burning grounds, provide for the registration of particulars concerning persons whose bodies are brought to burial or burning grounds, prescribe the mode of making and keeping the registers of burial and burning ground, and prescribe the form and manner of issue of licenses for burial and burning ground.[15]

The Ordinance ruled that no place outside the limits of any municipality should be used for the interment or burning of a body except under a license from the authorities. This authority could be the Colonial Secretary in Singapore or the Resident Councilor in Penang or the Chief Civil Officer in any other settlements. They had the power to grant or refuse such approvals for interment or cremation or to impose such conditions as were thought necessary. License was granted to those in charge of the places for burial. A fee was levied for the license. The granting of license for burial grounds did not imply or establish right to the individual or institution managing burial or cremation ground the title of land. Those who bury or burn any corpse in a place not licensed as a burial or cremation ground were liable to imprisonment of one year or a fine not exceeding a hundred dollars. There was also a provision for those who exhume a body buried in any place outside the limits of any municipality without the order of the authorities such as a magistrate, coroner or chief police office. Such contravention was liable to a severe fine not exceeding two hundred and fifty dollars.

A key regulation in the Ordinance provided the authorities the power to make available a place suitable for burial or cremation as well as funds to maintain the place. The authorities, however, retained the right to close any burial or cremation ground if its continued use endangered public health or comfort. The authorities could also revoke the license if there had been a contravention of the conditions of the license. A fee of $25 was levied on existing burial grounds and $50 for future private grounds. Whenever required the government would out of funds from the Legislative Council provide

13. This replaced Ordinance XIV of 1856. Ordinance 1887 itself was replaced by Ordinance No 58 of 1896.

14. Ordinance No 58: To regulate the use of Burials and Burning Grounds outside the limits of Municipalities, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

15. For regulations similar to this, see Claudine Salmon, "Ancient Chinese Cemeteries ...," in this issue.

public burial grounds. Such burial grounds would be for the use of different nationalities and religious communities. In laying down the rules the authorities were mindful of the multi-ethnic character of the various settlements under its administration. Hence, the Ordinance added a concluding provision that "…in carrying out this Ordinance due regard shall be had to the nationalities and to the religious usages of the several classes of the community".[16]

The two Ordinances enabled the authorities to monitor death and disease in Malaya. They set out the proper procedure by which burial or cremation of the dead was carried out. Thus, before a burial in the cemetery could be carried out, a death certificate providing details of the deceased as well as the cause and circumstances of death had to be produced.[17] Through this the state could ensure that all deaths were reported and could keep track of trends related to health and mortality. In this respect, the management of cemeteries by the Chinese community was important to the state mechanism in its monitoring of health and mortality.

Issue of Chinese Burial Grounds in Singapore

When Major McCallum brought up to the Singapore Municipal Council the concern about unregistered Chinese burial grounds found scattered within and near the city, the two regulations relating to registration of death and of burial grounds had not the time to be implemented. But even without the two regulations, the burial grounds of the small European communities in the settlements were, by comparison, better managed. The oldest known cemetery is the Protestant Cemetery in Penang where the first burial was reportedly made in 1789 and subsequently became the resting place for many of colonial administrators. They included Francis Light who took over the island for the English East India Company from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786. In Singapore, early reports referred to the moving of some early European graves to be reburied in Fort Canning in 1823, just four years after the British landed on the island.[18] In 1865 the old Fort Canning cemetery was closed and a new one opened in Bukit Timah Road. The Municipality bought the ground for $10,000 and a new grant issued on 22 Jan 1864. The site was consecrated by Bishop McDougal of Sarawak on 15 November and the first burial took place on 2 April 1864. In 1907 a new cemetery was open on 15 December by the

16. Ordinance No 58: To regulate the use of Burials and Burning Grounds outside the limits of Municipalities, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur. Also, No. 199. Rules for Burial and Burning Grounds within the state of Selangor made by the British Resident under Section 8 Regulation VII 1895 in letter from Chairman of Sanitary Board Kuala Lumpur "Requests a translation of the Rules for Burial and Burning, 12. February 1898," National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

17. Acting chairman, Sanitary Board, Kuala Lumpur, "Licensed burial and burning grounds in the Kuala Lumpur district, 8.3.1900," Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

18. Walter Makepeace, *One hundred years of Singapor*e, p. 587.

Municipality at Bidadari, replacing the one in Bukit Timah Road which was being closed.[19]

On 19 July 1889, when the subject of regulating Chinese burial grounds was brought before the Municipal Commission a motion was moved by several members calling on the government to deal, "effectually with the important question of burial grounds of both descriptions".[20] This referred to registered and unregistered burial grounds. The motion followed the presentation made by Major McCallum who using a map (not yet recovered) showed the uncontrolled spread of unregistered burial grounds. The Chinese members of the Municipality, in reacting to the motion, spoke up for private burial grounds. Tan Beng Wan 陈明远, a Chinese member, argued that the Chinese were very careful about interments.[21] Coffins were made of hard and durable wood and the graves were constructed of brick and other hard and strong materials. There was, therefore, no sanitation or other health risks. Tan Jiak Kim 陈若锦, another member, urged the government to leave existing unregistered graves alone and instead to deal with future cases.[22] He acknowledged that with population growth the indiscriminate use of land for burials was a risk to public health. However, the government should take steps to deal with the question of future Chinese burial grounds.

In August 1895 the subject of Chinese burial grounds was brought before the Municipal Commission again. Attention was given to Sections 238 and 239 of the proposed Municipal Consolidation and Amending Ordinance which entrusted the Municipal to provide and maintain, out its own funds, proper public burial grounds. The proposed Ordinance prohibited burials except in public municipal burying grounds or places registered under Section 105-69 of Ordinance XIV of 1856. Two issues were raised during the proceedings. First, the new Bill did not vest or entrust Chinese burial ground with the Municipal Commissioners. Rather these were handed to the trustees including those in the Chinese community. In reaction to this, government members called for the Municipality to be given the authority over every Chinese burial

19. Walter Makepeace, *One hundred years of Singapor*e, p. 491.

20. *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, "Municipal Commission", 19 July 1889, p. 1.

21. Tan Beng Wan was born in Annam in 1850, educated at Singapore's Raffles Institution and became partner of Kim Tian and Company. He was elected Municipal Commissioner in December 1888 and re-elected again in 1889 for a three-year term. He was also a director of the Straits Insurance Company. Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (First ed., 1923), Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1957, pp. 263-264.

22. Tan Jiak Kim (b. 29 April 1859, Singapore - d. 22 Oct. 1917, Singapore) took over the family firm of Kim Seng and Company and was also involved in the Singapore banking and insurance industry. He represented the Hokkiens in the Chinese Advisory Board, was one of the founders of the Straits Chinese British Association, and following the passing of the Municipal Ordinance Act in 1887, was elected Municipal Commissioner from 1888 to 1892 and from 1894 to 1897. Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years*' *History of the Chinese in Singapore*, pp. 194-195.

ground. Second, government members called for the prohibition of private burial land. The time has come, a member declared, that 'the land is made for the living, not for the dead and instead of every pretty hill spot being occupied by a grave; they would rather see a hut there."[23]

In the debate, the Chinese members, all of whom were wealthy businessmen, seemed more concerned about the right to maintain private burial grounds. Thus, Seah Liang Seah 佘连城, a leader of the Teochius, contended that it was not true that Singapore would be taken up entirely by private burial ground because only the wealthy could afford to buy such lots.[24] And there were not, according to Seah, many wealthy Chinese in Singapore. Seah claimed that land bought for such burial purposes were usually of poor soil condition. Seah further argued that if private burial grounds were not allowed, many Chinese might move elsewhere where private burial was permitted, and Singapore would not be able to attract Chinese migrants.[25] Tan Jiak Kim, another member, in arguing for private burial sites called for greater sensitivity to Chinese customs and beliefs. He explained that it was the community's custom to choose 'the most suitable site – geomancy, and it was necessary to decide long before a rich man died, the site of his grave'.[26] Geomancy was the Chinese science of selecting favourable sites that would bring much blessing for the family. For the Chinese, only with private burial sites was it possible to allow selection to be determined by geomancy. Tan further explained that private cemeteries were necessary for the convenience of ladies especially from rich families. It was then not the custom for Chinese ladies to appear in public, and in the Straits Settlements during this period females were not allowed to venture out of their homes. Private burial grounds therefore allowed them to visit graves of family members without having to venture far from their homes.

But it was very clear that as colonial power consolidated in Malaya and Singapore, the state was determined to exercise greater control over burial grounds. With growth of population and resulting competition for land as well as of health concern, it could not allow unregulated burials grounds. The Chinese population recognized that increasing state control was inevitable. They therefore appealed that all existing graves be maintained and that unregistered burial grounds and cemeteries be given a grace period to be registered.[27] Furthermore, they wanted the right to have private burials ground.

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23. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (1884-1942), 20 August 1895, p. 104.

24. Seah Liang Seah (b. 1850, Singapore–d. 14 Sept. 1925, Singapore) studied at St Joseph's Institution and later took over the family's firm of Eu Chin and Company. He was leader of the Teochiu organization Ngee Ann Kongsi 义安公司 and served as Municipal Commissioner and later as member of the Legislative Council. Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore,* pp. 212-213.

25. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (1884-1942) 20 August 1895, p. 104.

26. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (1884-1942) 20 August 1895, p. 104.

27. *The Eastern Daily Mail*, "The Chinese Cemeteries," 18 December 1906.

On this the Chinese members managed to defeat an amendment to a Bill that prohibited the creation of private burials grounds within the Municipality unless licensed by the Municipal Commissioners. The amendment was moved by government members in the council who wanted such discretionary power to be withdrawn from the Municipal Commissioners. Arguing against this, Dr Lim Boon Keng 林文庆, a leader of the Straits Chinese, contended that the Municipal Commissioners was a competent body which should have the independence and the power to decide on application for new private burial grounds[28]. The *Straits Times* in an editorial on 24 July 1896 supported Dr Lim's position. The *Straits Times* commented:

> The truth is that while we must not allow Chinese ideas to override the interests of a British colony, neither must we allow the opinions of a rapidly changing community of Europeans to override entirely the old prejudices of Asia.
> Dr Lim Boon Keng remains the successful champion of the privileges of dead Chinamen and of the discretion of living Commissioners.[29]

The *Straits Times* at this time represented the business community and took a position against expanding state power. In the end, the state decided that outside municipal limits, the responsibility of licensing and controlling burial grounds was passed to the colonial Government under the Burial Ordinance [XIX] of 1896 while within municipal limits the control of burial grounds was entrusted to the Municipal Commission under sections 232 to 238 of the Municipal Ordinance [XV] of 1896.[30]

Hokkien Cemeteries in Penang

The issue of unregulated private cemeteries did not appear to be a problem in early peninsular Malaya. There the Chinese community took an early and active part with arranging proper sites for burial of its dead. Indeed in Penang with its large Hokkien population, the Hokkien associations came together to acquire land for cemeteries and to organize their use for burials. Certainly, the first Chinese cemetery in colonial Malaya was in Penang and over the years, the Hokkien associations looked after some five cemeteries.

The earliest of the Hokkien cemeteries is the Batu Lanchang Chinese Cemetery that dates back to 1805 and is located to the southwest of George Town (see map).[31] Penang was established in 1786 and a Chinese community

28. Dr Lim Boon Keng (1867, Penang - 1957, Singapore) studied medicine at Edinburgh University. He helped set up the Straits Chinese British Association and was involved in banking and insurance business. He was a member of the Singapore Municipal and the Legislative Council. Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years*' *History of the Chinese in Singapore*, p. 407.

29. *The Straits Times,* "The Chinese Dead," 24 July 1896, p. 2.

30. Brenda S.A. Yeoh, "The Control of 'Sacred' Space: Conflicts Over the Chinese Burial Grounds in Colonial Singapore, 1880-1930," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 22:2 (Sept. 1991), pp. 282-311.

31. Map of Penang, from Survey Dept Federation of Malaya, *Map of the Municipality of*

had begun to settle there. In that same year the British appointed Koh Lay Huan 辜礼欢 as the first Kapitan China of the settlement. It was in Batu Lanchang cemetery that Koh Lay Huan was buried. When the grounds of Batu Lanchang began to fill up a second cemetery of the Hokkiens was opened in 1842 in Mount Erskine to the northwest of the city (see map).[32] After that there were the Batu Gantong Chinese Cemetery, located opposite the Race Course (see map), that opened in 1884, the Paya Terubong Chinese Cemetery that began in 1941, and the Teluk Bahang Chinese Cemetery that started in 1965. All these cemeteries are today managed by the United Hokkien Association.

There are other Chinese cemeteries on the island. There is a very old and large cemetery for the Cantonese located just north of the Mount Erskine Hokkien cemetery. Managed by the Kwantung and Teochiu Association, this cemetery was divided into separate sections for Cantonese and Teochius. Two other cemeteries are burial grounds reserved only for clan members. These are the 17-acre Khoo 邱 clan cemetery (located in Farlim) opened in 1920 and the 30-acre cemetery for the Cheah 谢 clan (Mt. Erskine area) opened in 1901.

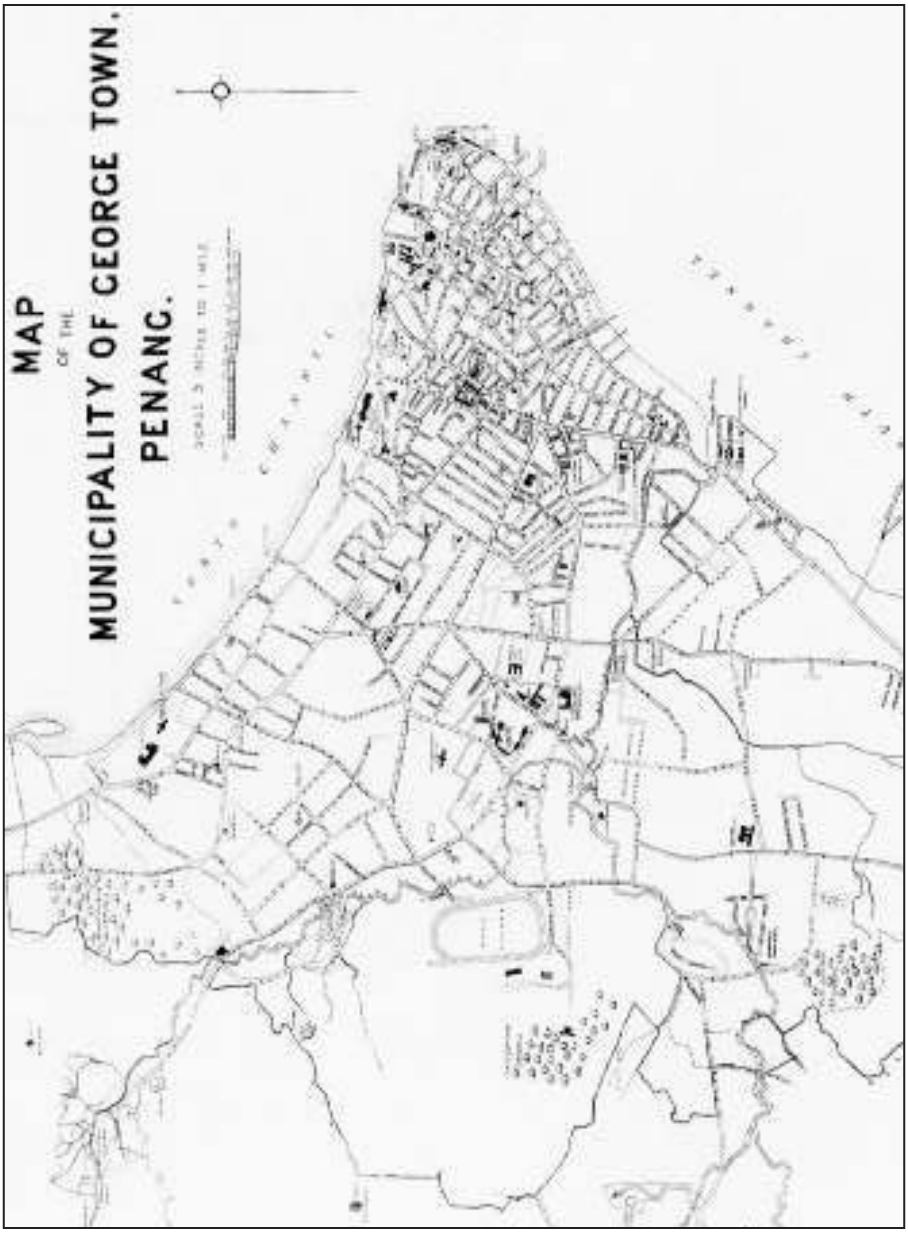
The Batu Gantong cemetery illustrates the early initiative of Chinese in Malaya in organizing their burial ground. It started when in 1884 a group of Hokkien leaders decided to open a new cemetery as the old one was filling up. The initiative came from Lee Phee Yeow 李丕耀, chairman of Chong Moh 崇茂 and Company, then the largest shipping company in Penang. Chong Moh and Co traded in rice and other commodities within the region.[33] Lee and several other Hokkien leaders in 1884 became trustees for the new cemetery. Subscriptions were invited of which Chong Moh contributed $20,000.[34] With over $87,000 collected they bought several plantations located about 3 miles from the then city centre. They paid $23,000 for the plantations and these were merged into one piece of 84 acres. The rest of the money was used to develop the cemetery. The higher grounds of 20 acres surrounded by coconut trees became the first phase marked out for burials. A set of buildings directly in front of the burials sites was erected for the use of the public. Constructed with quality materials, there were facilities like bathrooms and kitchens. The facilities could accommodate about a thousand people. The burial site was connected to the public highway by a metalled road constructed out of

George Town, Penang, probably Kuala Lumpur, 1951, Map No.152, reproduced in Frédéric Durand & Richard Curtis, *Maps of Malaysia and Borneo: Discovery, Statehood and Progress*, Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didier Millet, 2013, p. 231.

32. W. Franke 傅吾康 & Chen Tieh Fan 陈铁凡, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia / Malaixiya huawen mingke cuibian* 马来西亚华文铭刻粹编, 3 vols, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1982-1987, II, p. 713.

33. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia*, II, p. 724. Wu Xiao An, *Chinese Business in the Making of a Malay State, 1882-1941: Kedah and Penang,* Singapore: NUS Press, 2010, pp. 48-49.

34. Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia*, II, p. 738.


MAP
OF THE
MUNICIPALITY OF GEORGE TOWN,
PENANG.

the trustees' expenses. The place was looked after by a custodian and four workmen.

The cemetery was maintained and supported entirely by a management under the trustees. After the initial funds were spent, operating expenses came from proceeds through the leasing of coconut and other fruit trees in the land surrounding the burial sites. Revenue also came from the sale of burial plots. The raising of money to purchase the land, development of facilities and maintenance of the place came under the charge of the trustees.[35] There was minimal state involvement in the Batu Gantong Hokkien cemetery. The only obligation of the cemetery management to the state was the need to ensure that all burials be preceded by the presentation of a certificate of death issued by the police. The certificate allowed the informant of death to select a grave. After the selection was made, a permit was obtained from the cemetery manager to proceed with the burial.

How did the Batu Gantong cemetery see itself as serving the Hokkien community? The rules drafted in 1884 provide some insight into the concerns of the trustees and the Hokkien elders.[36] First, the trustees provided burial facilities for members of the Hokkien community. Even destitute members were taken care of. Graves in the cemetery had three different rows differentiated by the size of the burial lots. The rows are arranged alternately. The first row consisted of single graves followed by a second row of double graves. The third row of much smaller size burial lots was for paupers. Fees are levied for the first two rows which went towards the maintenance of the cemetery. No fee was charged for the pauper's row of graves. In this way, the burial needs of all members of the Hokkien community were met. No member of the community was denied a burial lot in a period when immigrant life was tough and there were many poor among them.

Second, the early trustees were strict as to who could be buried in the cemetery. Women of other nationalities who were wives or concubines of Hokkien men and who embraced the religious practices of the Hokkiens were allowed to be buried in the cemetery. However, "such of our people as have embraced other religions are not allowed to be buried here." It is not clear whether this applied to both Hokkien men and women. So particular were the trustee to ensure that the character of the Hokkien cemetery be safeguarded that the rules provided for the disinterment of those buried where false information had been given and removed to a cemetery assigned for the burial of people of the deceased's actual faith.

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35. Report on the Hokkien burial ground at Batu Gantong, Penang, 2 September 1896, Chinese Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

36. "Rules for the Hokkien Burial Ground, Batu Gantong, Penang," in Report on the Hokkien burial ground at Batu Gantong, Penang, 2 September 1896, Chinese Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur. Also, Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Malaysia*, II, pp. 751-752.

Finally, the trustees were strict about re-burials. Those already buried elsewhere in Penang were not permitted to be placed in Batu Gantong. Coffined bodies from other countries or those temporarily buried elsewhere but had the intention of final interment in Batu Gantong were allowed. This ruling reflects the strong trading feature of the Hokkien community in Penang. Penang was an entrepôt centre with traders and shippers, principally Hokkiens, travelling throughout the region that included Burma, Indonesia, and Thailand. Thus, whenever death occurred overseas, bodies were temporarily interred there and subsequent brought back for burial in Penang.

Kuala Lumpur: State Grants Land for New Chinese Cemetery

It was in Kuala Lumpur that the state involved itself in Chinese cemetery matters to a greater extent than in the cases discussed. There was an old Chinese cemetery, probably the earliest in the town, used first by Hakka settlers and later by Cantonese and Hokkien. Located on Petaling Hill just about a kilometre from Sultan Street, the cemetery soon filled up and a new one was needed. In 1895, the state government of Selangor approved the leasing of more than 500 acres of land for use as a general cemetery for the Chinese community in Kuala Lumpur. This represented a major project of cooperation between the state and the community. The offer was generous and the land was just outside the growing town. The new one was located almost adjacent to the old cemetery.[37]

The initiative to open a new cemetery for the community came from a group of wealthy Chinese merchants led by the Captain China of Kuala Lumpur Yap Kwan Seng 叶观盛 (1846-1901). In his letter to the Acting Secretary of the Chinese Secretariat, Yap asked for 650 acres of land for the proposed cemetery of which 500 acres were for the Kwangtung Association and 150 acres for the Hokkien.[38] A Hakka, he was supported in his request by Loke Yew, a Cantonese and one of the richest businessmen in the country. Prominent within the Chinese community, these leaders were also close to British officials and merchants. As such their request for such a large piece of land for a general cemetery was sympathetically received.[39] In June 1896 the government approved the granting of 500 acres of land.[40] The Secretary of

37. The Chief Surveyor, Selangor to Government Secretary, Selangor, 8 May 1893, Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

38. Captain China's Office, Kuala Lumpur to Acting Chinese Secretary, Kuala Lumpur, 9 April 1895C, Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

39. Acting Chinese Secretary to the Government Secretary, Kuala Lumpur, 19 April 1895, Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

40. Secretary to Government, Kuala Lumpur, to Chairman of Sanitary Board Kuala Lumpur, "Chinese Cemetery," 17 December 1895; Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur; Acting Collector Land Revenue, Kuala Lumpur, Reservation of land for Chinese cemetery: Reports completion of survey and enclosed notice for Gazette, 29 June 1896,

Chinese affairs, who worked well with Chinese leaders, subsequently appealed but unsuccessfully to the state to grant the 650 acres originally asked.[41] The land granted was to be shared by the Hokkien and the large Cantonese community. A road built and maintained by the state served as a boundary separating the 150 acres Hokkien cemetery from the larger Cantonese section. In addition, the state provided and maintained approach roads to the cemetery. Furthermore, the licensee had exclusive rights to all timber and jungle produce on the land subject to payment of such government duties as were liable. However the use of the land as a cemetery did not entitle the trustees to ownership of the land.

The granting of land was clearly a move by the colonial administration to regulate the functioning of a large Chinese cemetery. By 1895, the British had consolidated its administrative control of the Malay states. Kuala Lumpur in 1890 was made not only the capital of the state of Selangor but also the administrative centre of the newly established Federated Malay States. It was also fast growing as a commercial centre. That led to population growth particularly of the Chinese. There was therefore concern that unregulated Chinese burials posed health hazards as well as hindering an orderly and planned development of a capital city.

Indeed, the Acting Secretary of the Selangor Chinese Secretariat in writing to the Yap Kwan Seng explained the purpose of the granting of land for a Chinese cemetery:

> The Government proposes to grant for this purpose an area of about 500 acres and to pass legislation making it penal to bury the body of any Chinese dying in Kuala Lumpur within Town limits or dying anywhere within 2 miles of any boundary of the new cemetery.

In approving the opening the new Chinese cemetery, the British administration in Selangor set the terms for its use. Failure to fulfil or meet some of the conditions could result in the land taken back.[42] Earlier, Yap Kwan Seng, the Captain China, requested that the Chinese community be allowed to control the new cemetery:

> The Chinese community pray that they may be allowed to control their own cemetery; their rules being of course subject to the approval of the Resident.[43]

The Acting Chinese Secretary wrote that the government would appoint a Board of Management consisting of twelve of the leading merchants. The board

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Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

41. Secretary for Chinese Affairs, Kuala Lumpur, "New Chinese Cemetery." Recommends that additional land be reserved. 13 December 1898, Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

42. Chairman, Sanitary Board, "Rules for burial and burning grounds, 19.10.1896," Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

43. Captain China's Office, Kuala Lumpur to the Acting Chinese Secretary, Kuala Lumpur 27 August 1895, Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

of management was held responsible for the proper upkeep of the cemetery.[44] Later, it was decided that there would be two boards of management following the division of the cemetery into a Hokkien and Cantonese section. Each board would appoint two of its members to be trustees subject to the approval by the government.[45] The cemetery license was granted to the trustees. The boards of managements were tasked with drafting guidelines for the functioning of the cemetery. These guidelines had to be submitted to the Resident, the colonial head of the state.

The government rules allowed for the cemetery to be supported by voluntary contribution. The annual accounts of all funds collected were to be signed by the trustees and forwarded to the Secretary of Chinese Affairs. One member of the board would be elected to serve as manager of the cemetery. The Resident reserved the right to close the cemetery if it was found that it could not be further used without endangering public health or that the cemetery had contravened the conditions of the license. Government rules for the two cemetery boards provided the allotments of grave lots for paupers. Expenses for burials were to be borne by the Tung Shin 同善 Institution, a voluntary Chinese social welfare organization in Kuala Lumpur. The managers and trustees of the cemetery were responsible for the upkeep of the cemetery and it was subject to inspection by authorized government officer. If found that the conditions were not complied with, the district officer could serve an order to have the surrounding area or the cemetery cleared and cleaned up.[46]

The occupier of every house in which a death happened or the principal person concerned in the burial of any corpse was to produce to the manager a certified extract from the register of deaths to show that the death had been duly registered under Section 10 of Regulation II of 1892. No burial could take place until such certified extract had been produced to the manager or caretaker. No interment could take place without the presence and permission of the caretakers who would be legally bound to be present at every interment or to be represented by some duly authorized person as his deputy. Every burial ground shall be fenced in or otherwise closed, and kept in decent and proper order.[47]

The decision to provide a site for the new Chinese cemetery was carried out not without some initial unhappiness all around.[48] The old Petaling Hill

44. F. Fox, Acting Chinese Secretary to the Captain China, 13 March 1895, Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

45. Chinese Secretary, Kuala Lumpur, "Draft rules for the management of Chinese cemeteries, 22 August 1896," Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

46. Chinese Secretary, Kuala Lumpur, "Draft rules for the management of Chinese cemeteries, 22 August 1896," Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

47. Chairman, Sanitary Board, Kuala Lumpur, "Requests a translation of the rules for burials and burning ground, 12.2.1898," Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

48. Minutes, Secretary to Government, 10 January 1899, Selangor Secretariat Files, National

Cantonese cemetery was given up to the Selangor Golf Club which was formed in 1895 and some of the graves there were relocated to the new cemetery. Many Chinese, however, had wanted the old Petaling Hill to be included as part of the new cemetery. This was because, according to the Secretary of Chinese Affairs, the Chinese considered the geomancy of the old Cantonese cemetery as favourable. It was also closer to the city centre. There was therefore considerable unhappiness among some Chinese when members of the Selangor Gold Club started using the golf link even before the old graves had been removed and re-located to the new cemetery. On the new Chinese cemetery, the Secretary of Chinese Affairs reported that 25 acres had been set aside for the Kwongsai 广西 sub-dialect group and this had reduced the original size of the cemetery for the larger Cantonese community. He also pointed out that parts of the new site, some 125 acres, were swampy and therefore unsuitable for burial. Finally, there were squatters in the new site and they had to be compensated and cleared.[49]

The Cemetery of the Kwangtung and Hokkien Associations

Since then, the Kuala Lumpur Chinese Cemetery came to be managed by the associations representing the Selangor Cantonese and the Selangor Hokkien communities. Each of the associations had a committee dealing with the section of the cemetery under its administration. Matters related to the cemetery were routinely brought before the main committees during the regular meetings.[50] Over the years as the cemetery began to be used, there was a need for additional facilities such as a pavilion, rest rooms, car park and resting places for bereaved family members and visitors. Decisions had also to be made about suitability of some of the religious statues and shrines as well as temples before approval was granted for their construction.[51]

More frequent were cases concerning the size of grave tombs which had exceeded the specifications allowed. The Hokkien section of the cemetery had three classes of graves, each differentiated by the size permitted and therefore the fee charged. Most cases of violation of the regulations related to permissible specification involved those in Category A where wealthier people were willing to pay for larger lots.[52] The number of such cases of outsized graves was not large and the committee, when faced with such cases, called

Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

49. Secretary for Chinese Affairs to Secretary to Government, 13 December 1898, Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

50. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 18 February 1955, Kuala Lumpur.

51. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 13 August 1954, 30 August 1955, 27 October 1955, Kuala Lumpur.

52. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 31 January 1958, Kuala Lumpur.

upon the maintenance staff to be vigilant. The staff was to monitor when work on tombstones was in progress to ensure that this kept to the specifications. In cases where specifications had been exceeded, the offending party was required to re-do the gravestone or to pay a fee for the additional land taken up.[53] Even as late as 1954 there was no concern that outsized graves could lead to rapid filling of the cemetery. Although smaller than the Kwangtung part, the Hokkien committee believed that its side of the cemetery had sufficient land for another 30 years of continued use. Indeed, requests made by the Municipal Council (formerly Sanitary Board) and a Chinese school board in 1954 to the Hokkien committee to cede small plots of land for the building of a female dormitory for a government training centre and for a Chinese girls' school, were positively considered.[54] The Hokkien committee was willing to give up the sub-lot for the female dormitory in exchange for a similar size plot of land nearby along Klang Road.

In contrast, the Kwantung committee in 1954 was starting to look for additional land as its section was filling up. In that year it wrote to the Hokkien committee asking if part of its land could be used for the burial use of Cantonese. The Kwangtung committee request is interesting. First, it indicates that communication between the two dialect associations was mostly through correspondence. The minutes of the Hokkien Association did not report of regular meetings between representations of the two associations to discuss cemetery matters even though they shared a common location and encountered similar issues. Although the Chinese community was beginning to develop some social cohesion and an evolving common identity, dialect demarcation remained strong. Indeed, the minutes of the Hokkien Association showed that more of the association's meetings and regular correspondence were with Hokkien associations elsewhere in Malaya as well as with organizations back in the Fujian province.[55] Second, the Kwantung committee request underlined the fact that the Cantonese population in Kuala Lumpur was larger as well as a growing one compared to the Hokkien counterpart. Hence by 1954 the Kwantung committee was looking for additional space for burials while the Hokkiens were confident that its part of the cemetery could be in continued use for another 30 years.[56]

Therefore, when the colonial government in 1954 offered the Kwantung and Hokkien Associations two new pieces of land in exchange for the existing

53. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 19 July 1954, 16 March 1957, Kuala Lumpur.

54. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 19 January 1954, Kuala Lumpur.

55. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 6 August, 1956, Kuala Lumpur.

56. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 24 April, 1955, Kuala Lumpur.

cemetery land, the Hokkien committee turned down the offer. The government's offer of sites for new cemeteries was made following reports that the Kwantung part of the Chinese cemetery had almost filled up. At the same time, with the expansion of the city, the land used by the existing Chinese cemetery had appreciated greatly in value and the government was keen to take it back for its own development. Significantly, in its offer of new sites, the government set four conditions. First, the new cemeteries were to be opened to all Chinese. This meant that no sections were to be reserved for particular dialect groups. This indicated that increasingly, the state regarded the Chinese community as undifferentiated. This could partly be an outcome of its continuing experience in the Malayan Emergency combating a largely Chinese-led insurgency. And in settling nearly 500,000 Chinese in newly created New Villages in this period of the 1950s, dialect differentiation was not a key consideration. Second, the size of the grave lots was now to be smaller. Third, the government proposed the practice of second burials in the new cemeteries as in Hong Kong. Burial was for seven years after which the body would be exhumed and interred in urns. The grave could then be re-used for new burials. Finally, the government indicated that the lease for the new cemetery land was only for 30 years. It wanted the association to indicate how much land they needed for the new cemetery.[57]

The offer was first made to the Kwantung Association as its section of the Kuala Lumpur cemetery was fast running out of space. The new cemeteries were to be in Salak South New Village to the south and Jinjiang New Village to the north.[58]

In January 1956 the Secretary of Chinese Affairs invited management representatives of cemeteries belonging to the Hokkien, Cantonese, and Kwongsai associations for a meeting.[59] In the meeting, the Hokkien association rejected the government's offer of a new site. Its delegation argued:

> We oppose the plan and refuse to accept the offer from the government as the burial grounds in the Hokkien Cemetery can be used for another 30 years. According to Chinese custom, we always respect tombs and do not allow them to be destroyed. Our fellow countrymen have already spent a lot of money on the Hokkien cemetery. Further plans will only be made when the burial grounds are full. We strongly oppose the proposal made by the government as they ruled that present cemeteries would be discontinued and relocated for the purpose of development. Many old cemeteries belonging to various other ethnic communities are still situated in the city area. So there is no reason to put an end to cemeteries that are still usable.[60]

57. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 7 October 1954, 23 February 1956, Kuala Lumpur.

58. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 19 March 1956, Kuala Lumpur.

59. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 2 February 1956, Kuala Lumpur.

60. Minutes of meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Hokkien Association, 21 February 1956, Kuala Lumpur.

The Hokkien Association was referring to the fact that in Kuala Lumpur at that time, there were some twelve cemeteries belonging to different communities. These included those described by the Kuala Lumpur Sanitary Board as belonging to the Chinese, Christians, Malays, Sikhs, Japanese, and Hindus.[61] The fact that the Hokkien cemetery still had unused lots and that it had spent money to develop and upkeep the place was an important argument. Association members were happy with the existing location and were not keen to disturb the graves through relocation. But it was also evident that even in the years after the war and just before the country's independence and where there had been much changes within the Chinese community and in the larger society, the Hokkien association as well as other associations were not willing to have a cemetery where their dialect identity and distinctive could not be maintained.

Conclusion

This article looks at how the burial grounds of the Chinese community came to be developed and managed over the years.[62] The process involved both the community and the state on policies and procedures for the management of Chinese cemeteries. For the state, allowing the Chinese community to manage its cemeteries was part of the process in regulating the broad area of health and sanitation. Through its Ordinances on birth and death as well as the Ordinance on burial grounds, the colonial state kept track of demographic changes.[63] More importantly, through mandatory registration it monitored trends in death and disease. Chinese cemeteries, as with all cemeteries, enforced the regulation that no burial could be carried without a death certificate being produced. Indirectly too, regulating burials and cemeteries allowed the state to extend some influence over the Chinese community.

Generally, the state and the Chinese community understood the need for some regulation and control of cemeteries. There were some initial resistance by the Chinese community to state efforts at regulating burial grounds. The wealthier Chinese, particularly, objected to moves by some European members in the Singapore Municipal Council to prohibit private burial grounds. But overall, the Chinese accepted the arguments that cemeteries had to be regulated for health and land-use reasons.

Finally, Chinese cemeteries were important markers of identity for the immigrant Chinese community. They served as monuments to those early

61. Minutes of Acting Chairman of Sanitary Board, Kuala Lumpur on Licensed Burial and Burning Grounds in the Kuala Lumpur District, 8 March 1900, Selangor Secretariat Files, National Archives, Kuala Lumpur.

62. Ministry of Housing and Local Government Malaysia, Planning Guidelines: Burial Grounds for Muslims and Non-Muslims, Kuala Lumpur, 1997.

63. Norman Owen (Ed.), *Death and Disease in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Oxford University Press for Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1987, pp. 3-30.

Chinese, many of whom were migrants, who came to work and to die in the new land they had settled in. They were indicators that the Chinese community was no longer transient. Fewer were returning to China with the intention of retiring and dying there. These were monuments reserved for particular dialect groups. The demarcation was clear as in the Kuala Lumpur Chinese cemetery where an access road separated the Kwantung and the Hokkien part of the burial ground. Within the Kwangtung cemetery, a separate section of about 25 acres served as the burial ground for the Kwongsai people. In the Batu Gantong Hokkien Cemetery in Penang, the rules forbad those who had married out of the Hokkien cultural practices to be buried there. When the state in 1954 proposed a new cemetery to replace the existing Kuala Lumpur Kwantung and Hokkien cemetery, there was strong objection that it should be open to all Chinese.

But such dialect-based cemeteries as they filled up are being replaced by larger community-based burial grounds. Land is scarce and expensive, and the dialect associations no longer can afford or have the resources to start their own cemeteries. The Chinese cemeteries in Penang and Kuala Lumpur represent a phase in the community's history that soon would pass into history.